

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 5
Number 2 *Winter 2006*

Article 4

Winter 2006

Review of Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*.

Dorian Stuber
Haverford College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Stuber, Dorian (2006). Review of "Review of Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss2/4>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss2/4>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Teresa Brennan, The Transmission of Affect. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. 227 pp. (+xi) ISBN 0801488621 (paper).

**Reviewed by Dorian Stuber
Haverford College**

Teresa Brennan's last work, *The Transmission of Affect*, is as ambitious as it is wide-ranging. Brennan here seeks nothing less than a new understanding of the relation between body and signification -- a relation that hinges on her particular definition of affect.

In elaborating this definition, Brennan weighs in on a concept of increasing interest to many in the humanities. Affect has seemed a way to supplement poststructuralism's persuasive but perhaps over-emphatic insistence on the preeminence of language and/or discourse. (Note that this interest in the extra-discursive extends to poststructuralism's most prominent practitioners; consider, for example, Derrida's insistence that the readability of a tear or a cry is not the same as the readability of a text.[1]) But until now this interest has lacked systematizing force, so that affect has threatened to become an ill-defined value, an empty term of the sort that Lacan called intellectual mouthwash.

Brennan goes some distance toward alleviating this threat. Her book offers a clear, even rigorous definition of affect. The most compelling -- and contentious -- result of that definition is the theory of language it generates. Although Brennan has no interest in immediately or necessarily privileging language over any other form of manifestation or expression, she also does not oppose language to corporeal expression. Indeed, the eventual tendency of her argument is to exhort another language, which she calls a "language of the flesh."

Brennan is well-versed in deconstruction, poststructuralism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, but she finds each of these methodologies insufficient because they are unable to accept their own conclusions. The decentered subject, says Brennan, need not necessitate the evacuation of meaning *tout court*. Indeed, real meaning is available only once we abandon the idea of the human subject *qua* ostensibly impervious and self-sufficient ego. Meaning is all around us, in the interlocking systems that make up what Brennan reluctantly calls "the life drive." Reluctantly, because this is too homogenizing a term for the "interweaving logical chains that are self-referential and exist independently of the subject, but which sustain the life of the subject's kind through their interaction" (146). The life drive exceeds any individual subject, and will always "choose" a species over an

individual. (The ego, says Brennan, thus opposes the life drive.) But, however differentiated, the life drive often appears in her text as a synonym for energy. Indeed, the tendency of her work as a whole has been to put the insights of psychoanalysis and Marxism in service of a theory of what she has elsewhere called "energetics": "the study of the energetic and affective connections between an individual, other people and the surrounding environment." [2]

The first chapter of *The Transmission of Affect* outlines the theory of affect that is then elaborated in the rest of the book. This theory is difficult -- but valuable -- enough to merit sustained explication. The argument begins from Brennan's belief that our habitual experience of the relation between body and language is one of opposition. The reason for this unfortunate non-alignment is the prevalence of negative affects; their overwhelming and distorting presence undermines our well-being. Brennan argues that to realign them we need, first, to become alert to the "other I" that has been overshadowed by the ego and that forms "an alternative center for coherence in the mind" (118); second, to attend to life as such rather than individual life; and, third, to value and promulgate a science of systems over a science of the individual.

It will be clear that affect, for Brennan, is a negative force. But what *is* it exactly? In dialectical fashion, it is most easily understood in opposition to what it is not. Specifically, affect is not feeling. Feelings, she says, offer a unified interpretation of particular sensory information: feelings are sensations that have found a match in words. Feelings are thus expressive in the fullest sense of the term; their function is one of discernment. Feelings are thoughtful, while affects are thoughtless. Ultimately, Brennan wants to release feeling from affect, so that sensation and word might become attuned.

Affect, then, despite occasional equivocations on Brennan's part, is an evaluative rather than a descriptive term. Brennan allows that affects can serve to protect the individual from imminent harm. They do so by helping to compose the self or ego as such. (Brennan defines the ego as the affects in a more solid or sedimented constellation.) But more often, especially in contemporary Western society, affects effect immanent harm. They do so by fooling us into thinking that the ego is something more than a useful fiction, something equivalent to being alive, when in fact it is the opposite of the life drive. The experience of affect is a restrictive, ultimately punitive experience. It is significant that the first reference to affect in the text is to "grief, anxiety, or anger" (1). The more we read, the more these seem the *only* affects. Joy, it seems, is something else entirely. It is a version of the love or "living attention" that the body can experience only in the absence of affect.

Modern consciousness, which is to say consciousness under the sway of "the physical toxicity and stress of daily life in the West" (22), ignores, even suppresses, the knowledge granted by feeling. With that knowledge comes the possibility of expression, for feeling is "structured like a language and functions in an analogous way" (23). To emphasize the expressive, precise quality of this feeling, Brennan sometimes calls it "finer feeling." Such feeling communicates the living attunement of the body that Brennan variously calls "fleshly intelligence," "fleshly codes," or a "language of the flesh."

Affects, by contrast, are overwhelming emotions (and moods and sentiments are "subsets referring to longer-lasting affective constellations" [6]). The most salient thing about affects, for Brennan, is that they are able to be transmitted -- indeed, they are necessarily transmitted. An affect is always experienced in a social situation (even if it is experienced differently from person to person). The book's title thus refers not to the transmission of this or that affect, considered as an entity or experience that might or might not be transmitted, but rather to the transmission that all affect necessarily is.

The moment of affect's transmission is a moment of judgment; this judgment relates to the projection or introjection of energy. Thus Brennan's definition of affect as "the physiological shift accompanying a judgment" (5). Affects are always material and composed of an energetic dimension. This means, says Brennan, that "we are not self-contained in terms of our energies" (6). The idea of transmitted affects thus "undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social" (7). According to Brennan, when we enter a room and unmistakably "feel the atmosphere" (of rank fear, for example), our experience is an instance of the transmission of affect. Significantly, such transmission happens not through sight but through smell. What we respond to is not anything we see (like body language) but rather something that we smell without even knowing it (this is called "unconscious olfaction"). Brennan theorizes a transfiguration more immediate than that of mimesis. For to restrict our thinking to visual clues is to protect our false idea of ourselves as self-contained. Taking a term from neuroscience, "entrainment," Brennan argues that the transmission of affect is a way of entraining or bringing into alignment our nervous and hormonal systems with those of others. The moods of others affect our own, which is to say they affect our very physiology, at the unconscious level of hormones and pheromones. When we enter an anxiety-laden room, for example, we perceive that fear by smelling it, which leads us to breathe more quickly, to sweat, to clench our hands, and to react emotionally to those changes. Of course, that emotional reaction depends on who we are, and on our own personal histories. We might be inclined to accept this fear as a kind of hostility directed at us, and

become anxious or depressed. Or we might be inclined to direct the fear against someone else, and become aggressive or hostile.

At a time when behavior is increasingly thought to be genetically determined, Brennan insists that affect originates in the social, and that the social conditions the biological. What is often dismissively called "atmosphere" or "environment" is for Brennan a force that gets inside us and influences our very bodily workings. Affects can enhance us, when we project them out on to others, or they can deplete us, when we introject them. But that enhancement can only ever be temporary, for ultimately such projection is a contemptible psychic "dumping," a nefarious judgment in which we fob off our own emotions on another, by ascribing them, rather than ourselves, to be the source of negativity. Judgment, as Brennan describes it, is the opposite of discernment. When we judge, we are possessed by affect. When we discern, we detach ourselves from affect: we experience insight, the process by which sensation and the expression of sensation connect. When we discern we are self-possessed, rather than self-contained. By contrast, when we are self-contained we are imprisoned in that calcified mass of affect called the ego, a state we can only maintain by continuing to project or transmit bad affects onto others, thus sealing ourselves off from any kinship with those others.

Transmission is thus the central element of Brennan's theory of affects. Although she is indebted to psychoanalysis as the modern methodology most attentive to the corporeal materiality of affects, her own theory diverges from Freud's metapsychology "in that it postulates an origin for affects that is independent of the individual experiencing them" (13). Hell, for Brennan, isn't other people. Rather, it's the self, considered as a self-contained subject defined against those others. For to think that, affectively speaking, we are individuals, such that our affects seem "our own," is to suffer from a fantasy. Indeed, for Brennan, this foundational fantasy governs Western modernity. It is experienced, in miniature, in the infant's projection of its passivity and helplessness on to the mother. The foundational fantasy is "the belief that 'we,' the passive infant, are the true fountain of energy, and the mother is a hapless, witless receptacle" (13).

For Brennan, the primary effect of this fantasy, in allowing for a subject-centered, self-interested point of view, is to denigrate the idea that the flesh is itself intelligent. In denying the corporeal "other I" that lies behind the ego, the Western subject denies the transmission of affect that nonetheless remains (destructively) operative. Projection/introjection is delusional inasmuch as it is not experienced as a transmission. The deluded subject thinks, for instance, that the other is bad and it itself is good; it fails to see that the rage and envy it attributes to the other is really its own.

Brennan's definition of fantasy -- "a mental activity that allows us to alter an

unpleasant reality by making it into something more pleasurable" (12) -- is psychoanalytic, but it shares none of the ambivalence that the term holds for psychoanalysis. For Brennan, fantasy is only ever an instrument of self-deception and false consciousness. She has no sense that fantasy might be a useful, productive, or generative function. (Brennan, we might say, hews more to Klein than to Winnicott.) One reason for this narrow understanding of fantasy is that Brennan understands psychic operations in world historical terms -- fantasy, for Brennan, is the Western fantasy of self-sufficiency, self-mastery, and, indeed, of self or ego that only began to take its current all-encompassing form in the eighteenth century. Although the judgmental transmission of affect is modeled by the exchange between infant and mother, it functions just as importantly at the level of cultural history. [3]

Having set forth in Chapter One this intricate theoretical definition of affect and its relation to fantasy, Brennan proceeds in the rest of her book to examine the transmission of affect in various social, physiological, and intellectual environments. In Chapter Two, she considers the relation between clinical analysis and the transmission of affect, arguing that psychoanalysis, too beholden to the notion that "the healthy person is a self-contained person" (24), has only fleetingly paid attention to transmission. Its most sustained thinking about transmission lies in the concepts of transference and counter-transference, but even these are usually considered as a repetition of the subject's concerns rather than as transmission properly speaking. Brennan upholds the (quite different) theories of Wilfred Bion and Jean Laplanche as moments that contest and critique the dominant tendency of analysis to shortchange transmission. In Chapter Three, Brennan examines the way affect can be transmitted -- and resisted -- within crowds. Here she takes on a century's worth of changing psychological and sociological research on crowd theory, paying particular attention to recent work in the field of endocrinology on hormonal interaction and olfactory entrainment. This biological interest continues in Chapter Four, in which Brennan discusses affect's transmission between mother and fetus. She argues that contemporary scientific evidence suggesting that the mother is actively, not passively, related to the fetus must be brought to bear on the way we understand the mother's relation to the child *after* birth. (This is a way of contesting the passive position to which the mother is relegated in the foundational fantasy.) For Brennan, the "living logic" of the mother's flesh shields the fetus from negative affects. Such "living logic," in the form of attention and love, ought, Brennan argues, to govern all our interactions. In Chapter Five, Brennan moves from the physiological to the cultural, by relating affects to the pre-modern, Judeo-Christian categories of demons and deadly sins. To understand affects as sins, "capable of moving from one person to another, is to do no more than to describe the transmission of affect in more anthropomorphic vocabulary" (115). This vocabulary interests

Brennan inasmuch as it might prove useful in combating affect's deadening tendencies.

It is perhaps by now clear that the ultimate thrust of her text is more than merely diagnostic. It is hortatory, evaluative, even prescriptive. She wants to do more than to describe what affects are and what they make us do. She wants to incite us to change ourselves by changing our relation to those affects, specifically by allowing us to resist their gross thoughtlessness. To resist affect, says Brennan, is to transform it.

In the book's final two chapters, Brennan suggests how that transformation might occur, through what she calls the education of the senses. That education turns on the possibility of relating experience to language in ever more refined ways -- a possibility that requires that we expand our definition of language to include the systems of the body. At stake is the body's very interpretability in language.

Here, too, Brennan is openly indebted to psychoanalysis. The fundamental premise of clinical practice is that we experience release -- and relief -- when we put words to our bodily experiences, that is to say, our symptoms. Brennan is not suggesting that we should replace corporeal expression with language, but rather that we should (re)align those modes of expression. That alignment requires discernment. As we have seen, discernment is the meditative process whereby the body's experiences can be named: "insofar as people attend actively, listen to what they are feeling, they can identify sensations, sounds, and images, that they can name or, after struggle, can find words for. We do this all the time. It is called thinking" (140). As always Brennan is here bracing in her directness -- and her refusal to separate intelligence and body. Brennan never opposes these qualities, just as she never opposes meditation and reason. (Her use of "meditation" thus recalls its use by Descartes in his *Meditations*.)

But Brennan is vague when it comes to explaining this alignment of corporeal with linguistic expression. What does "alignment" mean? How does it happen? Brennan follows Lacan in suggesting that language is an entity greater than any individual who uses it. It preexists her, and continues after her death. The structure of language and the structure of the individual are thus at cross purposes: language is eternal and infinite, whereas human life is temporal and finite. Brennan then equates this structure to the ego's relation to the greater processes of life of which it is only an insignificant part. Life itself -- which is expressed directly through those "languages" or forms of expression that Brennan variously calls "fleshly intelligence" or "fleshly codes" or "languages of the flesh" -- is infinite in the same way as grammatical language, and it is only the deluded, affect-laden perspective of the ego that fails to see this, by overstating its own importance. For Brennan, the only difference between corporeal and linguistic languages is that the

latter is "slower" than the former, because it incorporates self-consciousness of its own expressive capacities into its operation. The languages of the flesh, by contrast, are quick, almost instantaneous. (This description continues the book's disturbing equation of whatever is gross, unrefined and slow with whatever is harmful or bad.)

The senses -- particularly those senses that the West has devalued as vegetative or base, senses like smell and taste -- are attuned with the larger living logic. Our problem, says Brennan, is that the information they transmit "is interpreted or transliterated by something split from the senses" (137). This "something" is the language-wielding individual, which ought, for Brennan, to interpret in harmony or alignment with that living logic rather than in opposition to it. Brennan argues for the sundered unity of corporeal and linguistic languages inductively, by our experience of constriction when our feeling or problem remains nameless and our experience of release when "a hitherto nameless feeling succeeds in identifying itself" (149).

The passive construction in this last formulation gets to the heart of the matter. For although Brennan understands both linguistic and corporeal languages to exceed the individual, she also attributes tremendous power to the individual, who can transform language through learning, attention, and reasoning. (Her book concludes, in a version of Wittgenstein's aphorism, "Of that we cannot speak, thereof we must learn" [164].) This confusion over individual power or agency is not cleared up by referring, as Brennan repeatedly does, to an "other I" that must replace the position of the ego. The "other I" is by definition attuned to the "living logic" of the flesh -- but what is the status of this "attunement"? How do we find the words to express this dispersal of agency? Is this an active process or a passive one? Brennan occasionally hints that the body itself, as a sensing being, may operate on our linguistic choices: "Language may echo the facts of transmission; *sentir* may mean smell [in French] either because we once knew that we felt the other's feelings by smell or because the body knows it still and seeks the word that will best describe its operations" (149). The verbs here, "echoing" and "knowing," seem to describe opposite sorts of activities. The passivity of echoing is at odds with the activity of knowing.

Ultimately, it seems that Brennan would disagree with D. H. Lawrence's often cited contention that "we have no language for the feelings." [4] For Brennan, feelings are a kind of language that we can learn to speak -- or learn again, for we have been speaking it all along. But Brennan might agree with Lawrence's further insistence that we need another, perhaps surreptitious, way of getting at the feeling buried in our everyday language. And here, indeed, I think the writer Lawrence takes the lead over the theorist Brennan, in that the former offers a sustained treatment of how linguistic language might accommodate a valuable corporeal other. (Lawrence is simply more explicit about what all writers to some extent do.) In Brennan's

account, language -- no matter whether it be of the word or of the flesh -- is straightforwardly communicative. There seems to be no place for the waywardness of figural or rhetorical language -- even as she herself is beholden to it. Where does such language fit in Brennan's opposition of two kinds of signification? Why doesn't she consider figural language when she uses such central, yet unexamined, concepts as "alignment" or "attunement"? For are such terms not in some way metaphorical?

Any book that references fields as disparate as psychology, sociology, intellectual history, religious studies, psychoneuroendocrinology and developmental physiology is asking a lot of its readers. It must be said that the middle chapters of *The Transmission of Affect* make for difficult reading. The daunted reader, struggling with scientific research on hormones and sociological studies of crowd behavior, may well wonder just what sort of formidable polymath the book is aimed at. Alternatively, those with specialized knowledge in any of these fields may well find fault with Brennan's explications and conclusions. (I don't have the expertise to say.) These various difficulties do not, however, invalidate the book's appeal. Ambitious and innovative works of synthesis have a power that remains undiminished by whatever faults specialists might find in them. *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, is no less valuable for being an unreliable guide to the historical particulars of Greek drama. [5] The same is true of *The Transmission of Affect*. Brennan claims that her work on pheromones and hormones, for example, though clearly buttressed by much reading in highly specialized literature, is intended "to illustrate a philosophical thesis" (112). She adds, repeatedly, that her book is intended only to begin a conversation, the further development or fulfillment of which must be a collective endeavor. Yet even if we find Brennan's work difficult -- a reminder of all that we do not know, and, too often, are content not to know -- we would do well neither to dismiss it as hopelessly vague nor to lend much credence to its author's modesty. Indeed, a comparison to *The Birth of Tragedy* is not unwarranted. Like Nietzsche's, Brennan's book is most vital as a contribution to -- properly speaking, a meditation on -- the theoretical or philosophical question of the relation between living being and representation.

The theorization of this relation in terms of a possible, even eventual, reconciliation is quite breathtaking. The audacious scope of *The Transmission of Affect* is at once exhilarating and frustrating. For the book's intellectual fearlessness rests on a series of repeatedly invoked moral oppositions. Everything that is bad is matched by a corresponding and countervailing good -- not affect but feeling, not judgment but discernment, not self-containment but self-possession, not consciousness but awareness, not ego but "other I" or soul. The problem here is not that the substance of this "other I" -- to which all the other positive criterion contribute -- is deferred pending further research. The problem is rather the vagueness with which the good overcomes the bad. We should be grateful to Brennan for

making us attentive to the languages of the body, but we still need further consideration of the way that language as we have traditionally understood it relates to those other, still potentially metaphorical languages. In particular, we have not yet said all there is to say about the function of metaphor, metonymy and all the other rhetorical resources of figurative language as privileged elements in the task of aligning body and word.

Alas, we will need to continue this project without Brennan's guidance. The untimeliness of her death -- she was struck by a car as she was crossing a street, just as she had almost finished editing the manuscript -- is felt all the more keenly in light of the timeliness of her work's subject matter. But to remain true to the spirit of her inquiry we might recall her claim that one speaks one's truth from one's place in a system, not from one's place as an individual. In this way, *The Transmission of Affect* disavows its occasional exhaustive tendencies, and becomes instead part of the larger, living, attentive project it so compellingly enjoins.

Notes

1. Derrida, "Passages-from Traumatism to Promise," in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).
2. Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000): 10.
3. Brennan has developed this historical reading more fully in *Exhausting Modernity*. There she says that the fantasy in which the infant thinks the mother waits upon it, rather than it upon the mother, is the same one that is catered to by the commodity fetish of capitalism.
4. Lawrence, "The Novel and the Feelings" in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985): 203.
5. Joseph Frank makes this point in "A Hero of his Time," *The New Republic* (Vol. 232 No. 4706 & 4707 28 March & 4 April 2005): 26-32.